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SUBJECT: THAILAND POLITICAL UPDATE: SCHISMS AND
UNCERTAINTIES

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton, reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The caretaker Senate formed a Background Investigation Committee on August to look into the ten EC candidates for the next twenty days, after which the Senate will vote to select five winners. If the committee takes the full twenty days, it will likely lead to a delay of the elections scheduled for October 15. This is probably generally acceptable here if it is necessary. Meanwhile, factional schisms within the TRT are becoming more apparent, with rumors of various party leaders considering leaving politics -- perhaps as a ploy to pressure Thaksin to step aside. Commerce Minister Somkid is the latest rumored deserter. Thaksin dismissed the rumors, saying that, in any case, all his ministers were "just his helpers" and he is the main force in government. End Summary.

TO DELAY OR NOT DELAY?

¶2. (C) The caretaker Senate voted August 15 to form a Background Investigation Committee to examine the ten Election Commission (EC) candidates, setting a twenty day deadline to complete their investigation and bring the candidates to a vote. Although the committee could conceivably conclude their investigation prior to the twenty-day deadline, it appears unlikely that the new EC would be formed by August 24, when the royal decree calling for the election becomes effective. If August 24 passes without an existing EC, several possibilities arise --

SCENARIO ONE

¶3. (C) If the new EC is elected by the beginning of September, it could perhaps stick to scheduled October 15 election date. This, however, may be logistically problematic. The previous election commissioners already set September 5 as the date to begin candidate registration, so the new EC really must be formed by that date to either receive registrations or officially announce a delay. Even if the final EC members are selected and confirmed before September 5, they would need time to organize their administration in order to run a credible election. The new EC may try to stick to the election date set by the royal decree, since this has already been signed by the King (still recovering from his surgery last month.) However, this appears more and more difficult.

SCENARIO TWO

14. (SBU) The new EC could delay the candidate registration date and election date by means of requesting a new royal decree. (Note: By law, candidate registration occurs within twenty days of the royal decree's effective date, and the election within sixty days, so any delay beyond October 22 will require the King to sign a new decree. End note.) The EC would then have more time to prepare and run the election. The results of a delayed, but better-prepared election may also be better-received by the country.

LOVE HURTS

15. (SBU) Members of Thai Rak Thai (TRT) outside the party's strongholds are reportedly concerned that they could face a backlash in the election contests for constituency seats. We hear that many are trying to get more secure spots on the party list ballot. Traditionally, some important TRT figures are not MPs at all, but serve in ministerial or other political appointments. Elected MPs are secure in their positions, in most circumstances, until the next election, but Thaksin's ministers do not appear to have much job security. Thaksin is said to plan on divvying up these jobs in a way to benefit those closest to him, slating TRT factional leaders and some other key figures for political appointments rather than MP slots, and thereby "depriving" these individuals of the relative independence and security of MP status.

16. (C) Not surprisingly, rumors of more discontent within TRT are increasing. Newspapers reported this week that Commerce Minister Somkid, a founding member of TRT who is

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well regarded particularly by business leaders, is said to be considering taking a break from politics after the elections. (Somkid's concerns about Thaksin have been evident from our contacts with him as well.) This may just be part of a plan to put pressure on Thaksin to step aside, rather than drag TRT down with him. If so, it doesn't appear to be working so far. In reaction to the possible departure of Somkid, Thaksin told reporters that "today, I am the major force (in the government) and everybody else is just my helper." (Comment: another morale boost for the embattled TRT members. End comment.)

COMMENT

17. (C) Opposition parties such as the Democrats and Chart Thai may appreciate extra time on the campaign trail; delaying the election probably disadvantages Thaksin and the TRT. The already apparent schism within the TRT may deepen with passing time, and the ceaseless attacks targeting the PM may also weaken Thaksin's popularity, despite his continued strength in the North and Northeast. Leaving aside partisan issues, there is a compelling interest in getting a functioning, legitimate parliament and government in place without unnecessary delay. Nonetheless, Thaksin conceded today that the elections might slip until the end of October, and we expect that such a delay would be broadly acceptable if it were necessary. Once the new EC is in place -- hopefully in very early September -- we should finally get an election date we can count on.

BOYCE